

# Austrian Military Recruits and Their Records

by Karen Hobbs

Austrian military records held by the Kriegsarchiv in Vienna contain information about the soldiers who served in the Imperial army before 1868 and in the armies of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy after 1868. There are a lot of records of various kinds but the ones that are of most use to genealogists are the officer's "Qualifications Tabellen," the regimental musterlists, "Standestabellen," "Kirchenbucher," "Grundbuchblatter," and regimental histories.

The officer's "Qualifications Tabellen" are voluminous records of each officer's personal information, his various assignments, notes about how well he performed his duty and recommendations regarding promotion.

Regimental musterlists are lists of names of common soldiers who are on active duty at a given time. The lists usually do not give additional information about the individual soldiers named.

"Standestabellen" are regimental monthly reports. They list the regimental staff by name and rank. They divide the regiment into battalions and each battalion is further divided into companies. Each company will list soldiers on active duty and whether they are present. Those not present are listed under such additional headings as "deserted," "in hospital," assigned to "special duty detachment," "in prison," "on leave," etc. Monthly reports usually give the home town of each active-duty soldier and the name of his wife if he is married.

"Kirchenbucher" are military church records. They record marriages, births, baptisms and deaths of active duty soldiers and - if they are married - of their family members.

"Grundbuchblatter" are the personal records of individual soldiers. They tell where he came from, give a physical description of the soldier and have brief notations about when he mustered in and out, where he served while on active duty and his status at the time he mustered out (discharged with certificate or in the reserve).

(Every year or so hand-written copies were made of the hand-written military records kept by the various

Austrian regiments. The originals would be updated from time to time while the copies were not. A "Grundbuchblatter" that does not show both the date mustered in and the date mustered out is probably an incomplete copy. The more-complete record may be found with a second search.)

Regimental histories list such things as who commanded the regiment over time, where it was recruited and where it was stationed from year to year, in which campaigns the regiment participated and who received medals.

The imperial Austrian army had as many as 500,000 soldiers on active duty during wartime and because the rules for conscription exempted just about anyone who was in the upper classes, had an education, an "essential" profession or trade or enough property, the majority of the common soldiers were from the lower classes or peasant population. (As late as 1890 Bohemian soldiers were still almost 20% illiterate.) Since many of those who went to America were from that same group, it is often worthwhile to search for military records when trying to document an ancestor's hometown, date of birth or other information that is difficult to find elsewhere.

The Kriegsarchiv will do a general search for given records but they must know the regiment number and the approximate dates of service. Microfilmed military records (several thousand films) at LDS Family History Centers are also identified by year and by regiment.

Most peasants served in the infantry. The infantry included Jäger battalions, Landwehr battalions, and regular infantry regiments. Each category of infantry kept its own muster lists and rolls and each one was recruited from a fixed geographical district. When there is at least a vague idea of which political district might have been an ancestor's home, it is usually possible to find the right regiment or infantry unit. But the age when men were eligible for the draft and how long they had to serve (service obligation) is equally important in order to determine the possibility that an ancestor served in the army. The age for conscription gives the first year a man might have served and the active-duty portion of the service obligation tells the last year.

Because common soldiers generally could not marry the service obligation also affected the age when a man might marry. The later a man married, the greater the possibility that he served in the army. Typically, if a man arrived in America after age 28 and if his marriage did not take place until he was 28 years old there is a good chance that he served in the Austrian army.

Married men were ineligible for the draft. During wartime it was not uncommon for young men who faced induction to contract a quick marriage to avoid service. Often the newlyweds would have to live with parents and be virtual hired hands in the household because the young husband was not yet able to provide for a wife.

Exemption was also given to men who were disabled or who had poor vision or were otherwise unable to handle a rifle. There were some men who actually mutilated themselves, cutting off their "trigger fingers" in order to make themselves ineligible. Sometimes this did not work and these men still had to serve in the transportation corps.

Volunteering for service was attractive because it was one way to shorten the service obligation. Before 1868 certain volunteers only had to sign up for one or two years and at the end of that time their military obligation was fulfilled -- before 1868 such volunteers could not be recalled to active duty again. Volunteers were free to marry and to emigrate as soon as their one or two years of service was over.

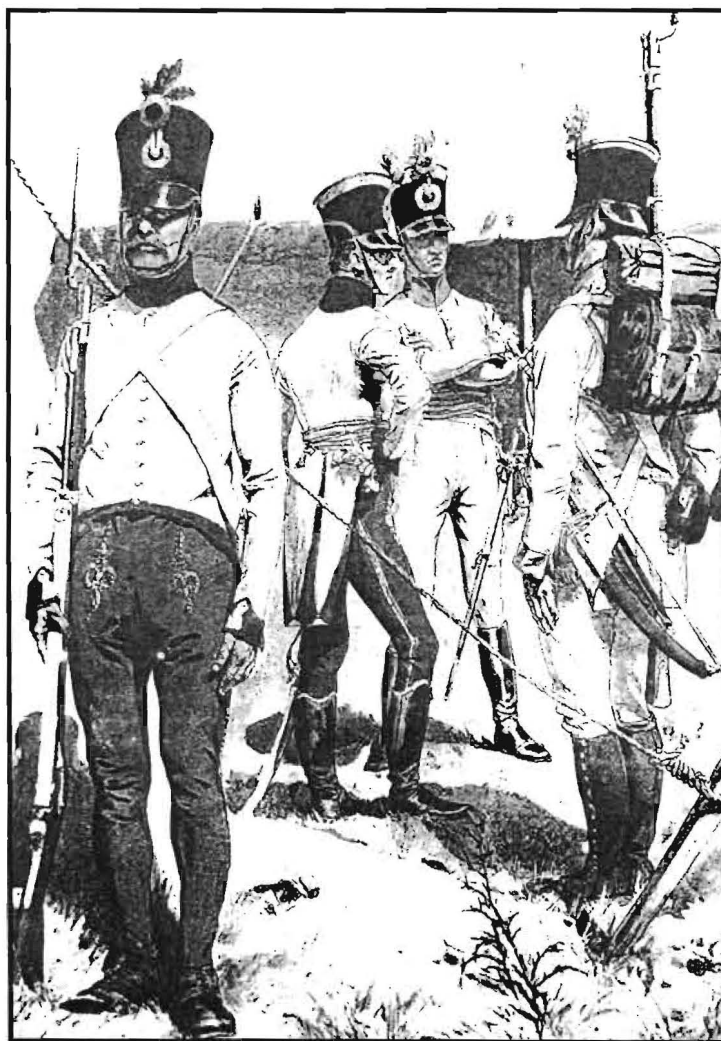
Ancestors who served as volunteers might enter the army at an earlier age than if they were drafted or they might enter it a year or two after they were eligible for conscription but had not been selected. Many who volunteered would do so out of patriotism during mobilization for war so it is helpful to know which wars were fought during the period a given ancestor was eligible to volunteer.

The Austrian army always recruited volunteers but when there were not enough of them they had to fill out the ranks by conscription. Generally, local authorities received quotas to fill and they could do

that any way they wished before 1868. For many villages it was an opportunity to empty the jails and poor houses and to get rid of any undesireables, mental defectives, or anyone else who was considered a burden on the community. But they also used a lottery. Under the rules for the lottery, all eligible men of conscription age received a number and those whose numbers were drawn had to report for induction. Wealthy men could purchase an exemption from the authorities. Others whose lottery numbers were "unlucky" would buy a "lucky" number, paying the "lucky" man to report in their place. Impoverished peasants could provide a windfall of from \$600 to \$1200 for their families in this manner. There were other exemptions from conscription which were based on the young man's status in his family (an only son) or in the community (a priest) which changed from time to time. Until 1848, noble lords might choose to ignore exemptions if they

wanted to punish someone -- they could force a man who might otherwise be exempt from the draft into the army as a punishment for shirking, unpaid debts, rents or taxes, or for other real or trumped-up transgressions.

The eligible age for conscription and the service obligation changed several times during the 19th century. At the beginning of the century soldiers faced a lifetime obligation which meant that once they finished active duty they could be recalled into the army at any time. The lifetime service obligation was the most oppressive of all the conscription rules. It caused many young men to abandon their



*Austrian Fusiliers 1809*

homes and flee to foreign lands or to big cities where they would be unknown and could avoid recruiters and conscription officials.

One device used to make the lifetime obligation less oppressive was the "indefinite furlough" during peacetime. Under this rule a man could be inducted, serve for a training period of about 18 months to two years and then he was put on "indefinite furlough" without pay. This allowed him to return to his home to make a living. If war broke out, he would be recalled. Furlough men were not carried on regimental muster rolls. The rolls listed only the men on active duty at any one time.

Disability of one kind or another that showed up after a soldier was inducted might lead to his early release. Most men who were mustered out for sickness or disability would receive a discharge certificate and the notation "discharged with certificate" would appear on his "Grundbuchblatter."

**A summary of 19th century rules for conscription follows:**

**1809:**

- Eligible age - all men between 17 and 40 years
- Lifetime service obligation
- Active duty obligation - 14 years unless furloughed
- All recruits were promised they would be furloughed
- Exemptions - critical farm workers, clerics, nobles, officials, some students.

**1827:**

- Eligible age - 17 years.
- Lifetime obligation repealed.
- Service obligation - 14 years.
- Active duty time varied depending on when/if a soldier was furloughed.
- Exemptions - unchanged except for addition of people with a certain amount of property and all university students.

During this period the state took over the substitution system, selling deferments as a "Befreiungstax" and paying part of the money collected to substitution volunteers. A substitution volunteer had to serve for the full period of obligation.

**1845:**

- Lottery System established.
- Eligible age - 20 years.
- Service obligation - 8 years.

Active duty training followed by "indefinite furlough" was common.

Exemptions included most of the middle and upper classes, officials, people in government service, students, lower-classes with upper-level education, professions, trades and larger land-holders.

**1848:**

- Serfs are freed and given title to their land.
- Noblemen no longer have much power over which men living in their dominions go into the army.

**1852:**

- Eligible age - 20 years.
- Service obligation - 8 years active plus 2 years in the reserve.
- Other rules were unchanged.

**1858:**

- New conscription law restates the old conditions.
- Eligible age - 20 years.
- Service obligation - 8 years active plus 2 years in the reserve.
- Exemptions - clerics, officials, state servants, students and independent farmers caring for someone 70 years old.

During mobilization for the war against Prussia in 1866, some students were inducted. Czech students at the University of Prague agreed to volunteer only if they could be in their own "Czech Legion" rather than one of the regular regiments.

**1867:**

- Universal military service introduced by Emperor.
- Eligible age - all men aged 21 - 23
- All eligible men report for examination during April and May.
- All those selected as fit for service faced induction the following October 1.
- Active duty obligation - 3 years
- Exemptions - those who paid the "Befreiungstax." Students were no longer exempt.

**1868:**

- Parliament takes over conscription regulation.
- Eligible age - all men aged 20 - 23
- Exemptions - "Befreiungstax" is repealed. All substitution now illegal.
- Exemptions added - All those in public service,

all justice and state officials, all those employed by the post, telegraph, railroads and steamship services, all clergy and candidates for the ministry, owners of farms of a specific size or larger along with their heirs (the youngest son) as long as they worked the land themselves, teachers and student teachers, and anyone who had to provide for elderly or underage family members who could not work.

Service Obligation - 12 years total

Active duty obligation for those inducted - 2 years plus 7 years reserve and 2 years in inactive Landwehr.

Alternate obligations:

2 years active Landwehr plus 10 years inactive Landwehr, or 10 years inactive reserve, 2 years inactive Landwehr.

The only records for this period are active-duty rolls. There are no rolls for those in the reserve or in inactive status.

After 1868 volunteers were generally accepted into the regular army -- the Landwehr could not have more than 5% volunteers. Volunteers had to be in good health and they must not be criminals. Under-age volunteers had to have parental consent. Certain young men who had a higher level of education and who could equip, clothe and feed themselves (and provide their own horse and tack in the cavalry) were encouraged to volunteer. They had to serve for only one year and they could choose which year it might be as long as it was prior to their 24th birthday.

1879:

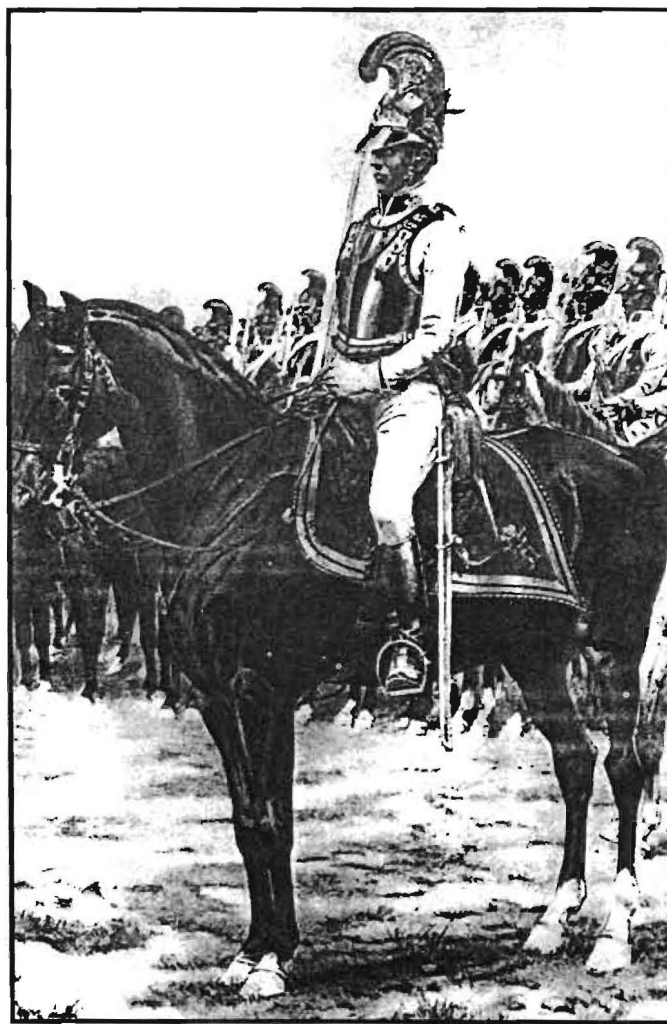
Active duty term set to three years.

The rules for conscription remained virtually unchanged for the rest of the 19th century. All men had to fulfill their military obligation before they could get a passport. Passports were processed by the "Konscriptions Amt" where the status of all eligible men was recorded. Passport record microfilms are also held in the LDS Family History Center Libraries.

All of the emigrants who arrived in the United States did not necessarily have passports. Some were deserters or perhaps men who had not completed their time in the reserves before they left their homeland. Others were men who were nearing draft age and who did not want to serve. Those who had no conscription record could not get passports and they often avoided German

ports where they would not be allowed to board ships and would be turned over to Austrian authorities. A favorite port for men without papers was Le Havre, France. The French did not check the papers of non-French emigrants and Austrians could board at French ports freely -- but they had to depart from their homes and cross frontiers covertly in order to arrive safely in France. The Kriegsarchiv has begun to distribute military records to the various autonomous lands of the former Austrian Empire. A letter to Vienna may bring the reply that the records for an ancestor's regiment are now kept in Prague. All queries to Vienna should include a request for the address of the archive which houses the records if they are no longer in Vienna.

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*Austrian Cuirassiers, 1815*